

Doing Oral History

A Practical Guide

SECOND EDITION

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CHAPTER 1

An Oral History of Our Time

What is oral history?

Memory is the core of oral history, from which meaning can be extracted and preserved. Simply put, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives. These interviews may be used for research or excerpted in a publication, radio or video documentary, museum exhibition, dramatization or other form of public presentation. Recordings, transcripts, catalogs, photographs and related documentary materials can also be posted on the Internet. Oral history does not include random taping, such as President Richard Nixon's surreptitious recording of his White House conversations, nor does it refer to recorded speeches, wiretapping, personal diaries on tape, or other sound recordings that lack the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee.¹

To avoid repeating common mistakes, oral historians have created standards for doing interviews, and established principles for dealing ethically with their interviewees. But oral history is too dynamic and creative a field to be entirely captured by any single definition. For every rule, an exception has worked. Imaginative interviewers are constantly developing and sharing new methods and uses of oral history. Any definition of the oral history process, or any method of interviewing, must reflect the goals of the specific project, the resources available, and other practical considerations.²

When did people begin collecting oral history?

As distinct from oral traditions—stories that societies have passed along in spoken form from generation to generation—oral history *interviewing* has been occurring since history was first recorded. Three thousand years ago, scribes of the Zhou dynasty in China collected the sayings of the people for the use of court

historians, and several centuries later, Thucydides interviewed participants in the Peloponnesian wars. Skepticism of oral testimony dates back equally as far. Thucydides complained that "different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories."³

During the European conquest of the Americas in the sixteenth century, Spanish chroniclers relied on oral sources to reconstruct the history of the indigenous people, from the Aztecs to the Incas. To assist in both colonization and conversion, they collected the testimony of survivors of these once great civilizations, concentrating on their social, economic, and religious traditions. Although strongly colored by the colonizers' cultural assumptions, these histories remain important sources for the new world's pre-Columbian history.⁴

In 1773, when Samuel Johnson argued against the proposition that an impartial history could not be written in the lifetime of those who had experienced the events, he reasoned that "a man, by talking with those of different sides, who were actors in it and putting down all that he hears, may in time collect the materials of a good narrative." Johnson admonished that "all history was at first oral" and noted that this was how Voltaire had prepared his histories of the French kings. Indeed, Voltaire wrote that he had questioned "old couriers, servants, great lords, and others" and recorded only "those facts about which they agree." Jules Michelet studied the French Revolution, a half century after it took place, by contrasting the official documents with the recollections of "peasants, townsfolk, old men, women, even children; which you can hear if you enter an evening into a village tavern."⁵

Soon after the battles of Lexington and Concord launched the American Revolution in 1775, a Congregationalist minister named William Gordon interviewed the participants, among them Paul Revere. Gordon's recounting of Revere's elaborate preparations contradicted efforts to portray the battles as unprovoked attacks by the British, and revolutionary leaders managed to suppress the story. Two centuries later the historian David Hackett Fischer declared Gordon's essay drawn from Revere's interview "remarkably full and accurate." In the 1870s the California publisher Hubert Howe Bancroft compiled his seven-volume *History of California* (1884–90) by sending students out to collect the papers and the reminiscences of nineteenth-century Mexican military governors and *alcaldes* (civilian officials) and of the first American settlers.⁶

It seemed reasonable to consult oral as well as written sources until the late nineteenth century, when the German school of scientific history promoted documentary research to the exclusion of other, less "objective" sources. Leopold von Ranke asserted that documents created at the time historical events occurred

are the most reliable form of historical evidence; Ranke's followers helped turn history from a literary form into an academic discipline dependent on the rigorous use of evidence. They trained historians to scrutinize documents in their search for truth and dismissed oral sources as folklore and myth, prized only by well-meaning but naive amateurs and antiquarians. They deemed oral evidence too subjective; shoddy memories told from a biased point of view.⁷

Ironically, historians turned away from oral sources just as other professions and disciplines were embracing the interview. Journalists made interviewing a mainstay of their craft around the time of the American Civil War. In 1859, when New York *Tribune* editor Horace Greeley went west to conduct a highly publicized interview of Mormon patriarch Brigham Young in Salt Lake City, he launched a trend in newspaper interviews. By 1868, President Andrew Johnson, facing impeachment by Congress, sought to present his side to the public by giving the first presidential interviews for attribution. "I want to give those fellows hell," Johnson told the reporter who was interviewing him, as he gestured towards the Capitol, "and I think I can do it better through your paper than through a message, because the people read the papers more than they do messages." Interviews quickly became so popular that clever politicians took to preparing their own question-and-answer dialogues, which obliging journalists published as news.⁸

In the 1890s, the U.S. Bureau of Ethnography dispatched researchers to record on wax cylinders the songs and stories of Native Americans. During the Depression of the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) hired unemployed writers to chronicle the lives of ordinary citizens. Especially valuable were the WPA's interviews with former slaves. Four decades later, when historians finally accepted these records—comprising more than 10,000 pages of interviews they helped to alter fundamentally the historical interpretation of American slavery.⁹

When the United States entered World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered all military branches and civilian agencies of the government to prepare records of their wartime experiences. Planning not only a postwar history, but a series of morale-boosting "American Forces in Action" booklets, the U.S. Army dispatched historians into the battlefields, armed with heavy wire recorders. Directed by Lt. Col. S. L. A. Marshall, a World War I veteran and journalist turned army historian, they pioneered in the post-combat interview, debriefing soldiers immediately after the battle to reconstruct the events of the day. Sgt. Forrest Pogue spent D-Day interviewing wounded soldiers who had been evacuated to a hospital ship anchored off Normandy Beach. Recalling concerns that his bulky wire recorder might attract sniper fire, Pogue noted that the army wanted live history "and live historians."¹⁰

Although the term had been used earlier, not until the 1940s did "oral history" attach itself to interviewing. A Harvard-educated Greenwich Village bohemian and flophouse denizen, Joseph Gould, otherwise known as "Professor Sea Gull," wandered around Manhattan collecting what he called "An Oral History of Our Time." Joseph Mitchell's profile of Gould that appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1942 drew attention to his crusade to record the stories of average people. "What people say is history," Gould insisted. "What we used to think was history—kings and queens, treaties, inventions, big battles, beheadings, Caesar, Napoleon, Pontius Pilate, Columbus, William Jennings Bryan—is only formal history and largely false. I'll put down the informal history of the shirt-sleeved multitude—what they had to say about their jobs, love affairs, vittles, spees, scrapes, and sorrows—or I'll perish in the attempt." The quest garnered many a free meal for Gould, but his oral history proved to be a figment of his imagination. When Gould died he left nothing behind but the name.¹¹

Another journalist-turned-historian, Allan Nevins, created the first modern oral history archives at Columbia University in 1948. A decade earlier, in his book *The Gateway to History*, Nevins had proposed to reinvigorate historical study in America by making "a systematic attempt to obtain from the lips and papers of living Americans who had led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic and cultural life of the last sixty years." Recognizing that modern communication and transportation were making letter-writing and diary-keeping obsolete, Nevins founded the Columbia Oral History Research Office. This new effort raised complaints from those who considered "Oral History" either too imprecise or too Freudian. But by the 1960s Nevins's successor, Louis Starr, could point out that the term had so worked its way into the language that newspapers were referring to it in the lower case. "Oral history, like it or not, is here to stay," Starr declared. "It's gone generic."¹²

The University of California at Berkeley launched a similar oral history program in 1954, as did UCLA in 1958. The Harry S. Truman Library inaugurated the first presidential library oral history program in 1960. The John F. Kennedy Library began interviewing shortly after Kennedy's assassination, before the library was constructed. Oral history soon became standard practice for building presidential collections. By 1967 the Oral History Association was founded, gaining membership throughout the United States and abroad. Oral history projects developed on every continent, and national oral history organizations formed from Mexico to New Zealand. In 1972 the Imperial War Museum in London established a Department of Sound Records to collect and preserve oral testimony of those servicemen and women who "for lack of inclination, opportunity, or literary skill" would leave no other record for history. A 1987 meeting

in Oxford, England, established the International Oral History Association, which meets biannually around the world.¹³

Worldwide political and social changes during the last decades of the twentieth century confronted historians with the inadequacy of archival documentation, which often reflected a discredited government rather than the resistance against it. Newly emerging nations in Asia and Africa found that the written documents reflected the views of former colonial masters and used oral history to revive buried national identities. When the Soviet Union dissolved, Russian and Eastern European oral historians' efforts began immediately to reexamine and rewrite that region's discredited official history by collecting personal testimony suppressed under Communist regimes. In Brazil and Argentina, oral history projects have focused on periods of military dictatorship to record the experiences of those brutalized by state terrorism. South Africans similarly turned to oral history in their search for truth and healing in the post-Apartheid era. Interviewers in many nations have found interviewing a critical tool when confronting issues of repression and reconciliation.¹⁴

Who is being interviewed?

In the United States the first oral history archives studiously avoided Joe Gould's "shirt-sleeved multitudes." Allan Nevins was a political historian who interviewed the major players in government, business, and society. Long after Nevins's retirement, Columbia continued to interview people of the stature of judges, cabinet members, senators, publishers, business executives, and civic leaders. By contrast, European oral history projects from the start were the domain of social historians who sought to record the everyday lives and experiences of working-class people.

Not until the 1970s did a new generation of American historians begin writing history "from the bottom up." Lacking the abundant manuscript resources and formal documentation available on the elites, they turned to oral sources. Encouraging these efforts were the best-selling books of Studs Terkel, a Chicago radio talk-show host and former WPA interviewer whose books, such as *Hard Times* (1970), *Working* (1974), and *The Good War* (1984) captured the voices of everyday people in a compelling manner. Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) similarly inspired people, especially African Americans, to collect their own family histories through interviews. The availability of convenient and relatively inexpensive cassette tape recorders and video recorders further helped to popularize oral history.¹⁵

For years oral historians argued the respective merits of "elite" versus "non-elite" interviewing. As the debate tapered off, oral history projects grew more

all-inclusive. The more that interviewers studied their practice, the more they realized that no one group had an exclusive understanding of the past, and that the best projects were those that cast their nets wide, recording as many different participants in events or members of a community as possible. Once a military oral historian was questioned about the possibility of using oral histories to reconstruct the social acculturation of barracks life. He responded coolly, "I only interview generals." Since then, oral history has changed, even in the military, where historians now conduct interviews with all ranks of enlisted personnel and officers, in garrison and in combat, to build important research collections.

When journalists interview, are they doing oral history?

Journalists usually interview subjects for very specific purposes having to do with the newspaper story, magazine article, or news broadcast they are preparing. Working on short deadlines, reporters depend heavily on oral rather than written sources. They may corner someone in a corridor or phone them to ask highly focused questions; often they have no time to elicit or listen to lengthy elaborations. Only a few short quotations may appear in their articles or as "sound bites" in their broadcasts. Journalists frequently interview without attribution, collecting "off-the-record" responses simply for background information with no intention of revealing these sources in their stories. Sometimes their interviews are recorded—especially if intended for broadcast—but, after the story appears, journalists do not retain the original interviews and notes for long. The record that journalists leave for the future consists primarily of their published articles or tapes of their broadcasts. Journalists rarely expect to deposit their interview tapes or notes in a library of archives where other researchers might examine them.

In this regard, journalists are not unlike scholarly researchers who conduct interviews to provide documentation for their articles or books without planning to open the interviews for general research. Usually they only excerpt the interviews in their books, rather than reproduce their full notes or transcripts. After the book is published, these documents most often languish in the author's files, packed away in a basement or attic.

An interview becomes an oral history only when it has been recorded, processed in some way, made available in an archive, library, or other repository, or reproduced in relatively verbatim form for publication. Availability for general research, reinterpretation, and verification defines oral history. By preserving the tapes and transcripts of their interviews, oral historians seek to leave as complete, candid, and reliable a record as possible.¹⁶

Regarding daily news reporting as the "first rough draft of history," many journalists have applied their talents to writing history, for which they instinctively turned to oral sources. Drawing on their skills as interviewers, they produced some notable works of oral history, such as Howell Raines's *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (1977), and Wallace Terry's *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (1984). Two of Lyndon Johnson's leading biographers are Robert Caro, an investigative journalist turned biographer, and Robert Dallek, a professional historian. When asked to explain the differences in their approaches to the same subject, Caro pointed to the extensive interviews he conducted with key participants, by comparison to Dallek, a university professor who relied more on manuscripts than interviews. To this, Dallek rebutted, "I'm not a journalist."¹⁷

What does it take to become an oral historian?

Oral history has always been multi-disciplinary. While many professional historians conduct oral history, a degree in history has never been a prerequisite for entering the field. Well-established scholars sometimes make poor interviewers, and those who are part of the community or profession being interviewed, if properly trained in conducting oral history, have advantages in establishing rapport and in prior knowledge. Law students have interviewed judges, women coal miners have successfully interviewed other women coal miners, and members of a community have conducted oral histories with their neighbors. In Alaska, a portrait artist conducted interviews with the people she was painting to gain a deeper understanding of the personalities she was trying to capture on canvas. In Japan, a physician interviewed his elderly patients in a fishing community that was rapidly disappearing. He wrote the resulting book from his office overlooking a new expressway built on the riverbed. "That vanished river, that water's edge, once rang out with the shouts of men hauling in their net as couples on houseboats waited among the reeds for night to fall. It wasn't so very long ago, and yet that era, that scenery, and the life-breath of those people have all vanished liked phantoms," the doctor wrote. The oral histories he collected stood as a tribute "to the too-swift passing of time."¹⁸

Saying that a Ph.D. in history is no requirement for doing oral history does not mean that anything anyone records is oral history. The Oral History Association has developed principles, standards, and guidelines to raise the consciousness and professional standards of all oral historians. There are interviewing skills to be learned. There are right and wrong ways to conduct an oral history. There are great differences between useable oral history and useless ones, and there are far too many of the latter.

Oral history has room for both the academic and the layperson. With reasonable training, through oral history courses, workshops, or manuals, anyone can conduct a useable oral history. Oral history conferences are notable for the variety of participants, among them radio and video documentary makers, museum curators, archivists, journalists, gerontologists, anthropologists, and folklorists. Regardless of their diverse objectives, they share many common methods of interviewing. "If an interview goes well, then we say it's magic," the Canadian investigative reporter John Sawatsky commented. "But it's not magic. It happens for an understandable reason. It's rational. It's a skill. It's easy to teach someone skills."¹⁹

How reliable is the information gathered by oral history?

"The most naive policeman knows that a witness should not always be taken at his word . . .," wrote the French historian Marc Bloch. "Similarly, it has been many a day since men first took it into their heads not to accept all historical evidence blindly." Oral history is as reliable or unreliable as other research sources. No single piece of data of any sort should be trusted completely, and all sources need to be tested against other evidence. The historian James MacGregor Burns, who was trained under S. L. A. Marshall to interview American soldiers during World War II, found that the interviews generated some spurious information (about how frequently infantrymen fired their rifles in combat) and also some startling insights (about how many troops were killed by friendly fire). Burns concluded that "such interviews were a most valuable contribution to military history, but only if used in careful conjunction with more conventional sources, like documents and enemy records."²⁰

Although archival documents have the advantage of not being influenced by later events or otherwise changing over time, as an interviewee might, documents are sometimes incomplete, inaccurate, and deceiving. For instance, researchers have found more than one occasion of a local newspaper ignoring an entire event, such as a strike against one of its major advertisers. Until the 1960s, most general circulation newspapers ignored news from black communities. As a result of such blind spots, oral history can develop information that might not have appeared in print. As the novelist Gore Vidal has commented: "Since I have been written about perhaps a bit more than most historians, I am not as impressed as they are by what I see in print, no matter how old and yellow the cutting."²¹

Scholars have accepted correspondence, diaries, and autobiographies as legitimate documentation, although their authors may be biased or incorrect. Politicians have kept diaries with publication in mind, designing them to present themselves in the best possible light. Oral history interviews are often conducted

years after the event, when memories have grown imprecise, but they have the advantage of being conducted by a trained interviewer who can raise questions and challenge dubious answers. As any researcher can attest, letter writers and diary keepers do not always address all the issues that scholars are researching. Autobiographers are often unaware of all the issues that interest researchers. Well-trained interviewers can coax interviewees into areas of concern to researchers that the interviewees might never have thought of discussing otherwise.

Then why are some historians still skeptical about oral history?

The skeptics distrust eyewitness accounts as being too subjective. When historians describe evidence as "objective," they mean not only unbiased but also unchanging, such as documents that remain the same over time even if interpretations of them shift. "Subjective" suggests a partial and a partisan point of view, less reliable because it is subject to alteration over time. When the oral historian Alessandro Portelli wrote of the need for broadly based interviewing that would "tell us not what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did," he was criticized for passivity and "unsystematic" reasoning. Some social historians have accused oral historians of swallowing whole the stories that informants tell them. They argue that a truer "people's history" must be based on statistical analysis and other objective data rather than on subjective individual testimony.

The correlated assumption that the historian, with hindsight and thorough research, perceives past events more clearly than those who lived through them. Or, as David Lodge asserted in his autobiographical novel *Out of the Shelter* (1989), history is the verdict "of those who weren't there on those who were."²²

Others express skepticism of the accuracy of human memory—a view sometimes shared by researchers who were themselves part of the history they study. After Abraham Lincoln's death, two of his private secretaries, John Nicolay and John Hay, collaborated on writing his biography. They naturally anticipated a great advantage in having access to Lincoln's closest confidants, but as Hay commented: "we ascertained after a very short experience that no confidence whatever could be placed in the memories of even the most intelligent and most honorable men when it came to narrating their relations with Lincoln." Nicolay likewise regarded most reminiscences of Lincoln as "worthless to history," and so the pair relied almost exclusively on written documents. Ironically, their preserved interviews have appeared more convincing to later scholars. Nicolay and Hay had rejected testimony that reflected poorly on Lincoln, especially those personal observations of Lincoln's bouts with depression and his troubled marriage. Other sources subsequently corroborated the stories that the protective secretaries chose to suppress.²³

At the Russian and Eastern European Institute at Indiana University, scholars engaged in a dispute over the validity of oral sources. Two members of the faculty had been mining statistics and documentary evidence to determine why Russian women continued to have fewer children even after Stalin outlawed abortion. One day they looked at each other with a common thought: "Why don't we just ask them?" After conducting a hundred interviews, they came to the conclusion that peasant women, whose mothers had often borne ten to twelve children, many of whom had died in infancy, simply ignored official orders and had illegal abortions. Another member of the same institute, dissented from this conclusion on the grounds that Russian peasants "tended to rely on rumor, so the reliability of their stories is not as interesting as their meaning." Yet even the dissenter agreed that the oral sources "may not tell you much about what Stalin was doing, but they are terribly useful in telling you about people's minds."²⁴

Should the interviewer be an objective—or neutral—observer?

Oral historians have debated how much an interviewer should intervene in the interview. Initially, some argued that independent researchers (those doing interviews for their own research) were too biased to conduct oral histories, and that archival oral historians would be better interviewers because they had no vested interest in any interpretation. In the type of oral history Allan Nevins pioneered at Columbia, the interviewer was envisioned as a neutral, objective collector of other people's reminiscences; this concept was carried to such extremes that the questions were eliminated entirely in Columbia's early transcripts. The interviewee's responses were rendered as an uninterrupted narrative. Although Columbia soon adopted the question-and-answer format for its transcripts, many books featuring oral history testimony continue to expunge the interviewer. Studs Terkel, for example, has disclosed only a few of the questions that elicited such compelling replies from his interviewees.²⁵

Other oral historians rejected the image of the neutral questioner and saw their role as that of an active agent in the process. The codirector of the Duke University Oral History Program, Lawrence Goodwyn, insisted that interviewers who remained passive surrender too much of their professional capacity. Goodwyn acknowledged, however, that more active interviewers risk distortion of their interviews by intruding their own cultural assumptions and political perspectives. Accepting subjectivity as inherent in the process and impossible to avoid, the advocates of a more active, scholarly interviewer believed that the interviewer's questioning actually involved "a first interpretation" of the interviewee's narrative. Influenced by trends in anthropology, literary criticism, and social history, they examined not only what was said, but what was left unsaid, and they

speculated about the lapses in historical memory. The more methodologically oriented oral historians criticized the uncritical acceptance of oral testimony, called for more thorough research and higher standards in conducting interviews, and lamented that the lack of scholarly analysis, by both interviewers and interview users, had turned oral history into "movement without aim."²⁶

Since the 1970s a proliferation of methodological studies has added not only "aim" but increasing depth and sophistication to oral history. Still, a difference remains between analyzing oral evidence *after* it has been collected and suggesting that theorizing *precede* the interview. An interviewer must always be prepared to abandon carefully prepared questions and follow the interviewee down unexpected paths, always helping the interviewee by questioning, guiding, coaxing, and challenging. Michael Frisch has offered a middle ground in his book, *A Shared Authority* (1990), whose clever title promotes the notion that both participants in an interview are responsible for its creation and share its authorship. Interviewers may believe they are more than an equal partner in this shared authority, since their questions shape the responses and they are extracting the raw material of memory for use in scholarship. But interviewers are actually less than an equal partner in the sense that the ultimate value of oral history lies in the substance of the interviewee's story. Nor does the interpretation of the interview rest exclusively on the interviewer's side of the microphone, for interviewees are constantly reinterpreting and analyzing their own motives and actions as they recall and describe them.²⁷

Discussions of oral history practices have been enriched by new applications of communications theory, feminist interviewing, and psychological studies of memory. Beginning oral historians should not be discouraged by the complexity of hermeneutics (the principles of interpretation), discourse analysis (language in use) or deconstruction (hidden and unspoken information in a narrative). Rather than start by trying to put any particular theory into practice, a new oral historian would be better advised to adopt the more pragmatic approach of "putting practice into theory." First gain some experience in conducting interviews before plunging too deeply into theoretical issues. Doing interviews actually raises curiosity about methodological debates, since it soon becomes apparent that the interviewer is more than collecting "just the facts."²⁸

These debates over theory and methodology go back to the first oral history colloquium in 1966. In a review of the proceedings of that meeting, Herman Kahn noted that the participants spent much time worrying about the nature and validity of oral history. All their self-questioning reminded him of an adolescent peering into a mirror and wondering, "What am I?" and, "Why am I not better known and more popular?" Introspection will and should continue, but Kahn

urged oral historians to get on with their job of interviewing: "They will need to cultivate patience, acquire self-assurance, and be content to leave the proof of their pudding to the scholars who are its ultimate consumers."²⁹

If doing an oral history is a shared responsibility between the interviewer and the interviewee, which one is the oral historian?

Both participate in the oral history, and neither one's role should be minimized, but for all practical purposes the oral historian is the one who schedules, prepares for, conducts, processes, and interprets the interview. The interviewer participates in the give-and-take of an interview by questioning and following up on the interviewee's responses and by providing names, dates, and other commonly forgotten information. But interviewers—especially when doing life histories—should never forget whose story is being told.

What's in a name? Some oral historians reject "interviewee" for its passive sound and have embraced more active designations like "informant," "respondent," "oral author," and "narrator," the latter term often used by folklorists and social scientists. The weight assigned to the two terms is reflected in the index to a collection of essays on oral history, whose various authors used both "interviewee" and "narrator." The index listing for "interviewee" is divided into "abandonment of," "apparent contradiction of," "deception of," "manipulation of," and "misinformation by." The index terms for "narrator" included "free expression and," "power of" and "in negotiation with researcher." The role of both is the same; only the nomenclature differs. Such vocabulary concerns aim to make oral historians more aware of how inequalities in the interviewer-interviewee relationship can influence the interview. In drafting its evaluation guidelines, the Oral History Association chose to retain the familiar triangular relationship of interviewer and interviewee producing the interview. Whatever terms employed, keep in mind that an oral history is a joint product, shaped by both parties.³⁰

MEMORY AND ORAL HISTORY

Isn't oral history limited by the fallibility of human memory?

Dealing with memory is risky business, and it is inescapably the interviewer's business. Every interviewer has a story about someone interviewed too late, when memory had lost its sharpness, begun to dim, or faded almost entirely. Such disappointments are balanced by experiences with interviewees who possess remarkable recall, who remember individuals and incidents clearly, and whose accounts can be corroborated in other evidence. As one of the interviewers who

collected oral histories with immigrants for the Ellis Island museum noted, elderly interviewees "might not remember their daughter's phone number. But they do remember what it was like when they got off the boat."³¹

Motivated by the death of baseball legend Ty Cobb in 1961, Lawrence Ritter set out to interview as many of the surviving pre-World War I baseball players as he could find. Traveling thousands of miles, he tracked down a group of elderly men who shared a remarkable storehouse of memories and an ability to articulate them vividly. "Many of the people I talked to had to think longer to get the names of all their great-grandchildren straight than they did to run down the batting order of the 1906 Chicago Cubs," he observed. But they were not garrulous old men chewing over oft-repeated stories. "Well, this is more than I've talked about in years, and it's good," said "Wahoo Sam" Crawford, who had played for the Detroit Tigers at the turn of the century. "I don't see many people, and even when I do I don't talk about baseball too much." As a skeptical researcher, Ritter went back to the old newspapers to verify the stories he heard, and almost without exception found that the events had occurred just as the old-time players had described them, embellished only occasionally "to dramatize a point, to emphasize a contrast, or to reveal a truth."³²

The study of memory by psychologists has concentrated largely on short-term memory rather than on the long-term recall of a life span. Short-term memory studies that evaluate the accuracy of an individual's perception of events are of little help in explaining the uncanny preciseness with which some interviewees recall events that took place decades ago, or in understanding how interviewees who had reached obvious senility—forgetful even that they had scheduled the interview—can still speak authentically about events far in the past. Long-term memory has been less thoroughly explored, although the phenomenon has often been commented upon. The Confederate leader Jefferson Davis, for instance, on his deathbed began recalling scenes from his youth as a West Point cadet. "I seem to remember more every day," Davis marveled.³³

The gerontologist Robert Butler has postulated that all people, as they grow older and perceive that they are approaching death, undergo a mental process of life review accounting for depression and despair in some, and for candor, serenity, and wisdom in others. The past "marches in review," permitting the elderly to survey and reflect especially on moments of unresolved conflict. Older people will review their lives whether anyone asks them about their memories or not, either mulling over their thoughts silently, or regaling family, neighbors, and visitors. In this process, the elderly may reveal details of their lives, and characteristics about themselves, previously unknown to their families and friends. Butler concluded that memory "serves the sense of self and its continuity; it

entertains us; it shames us; it pains us. Memory can tell our origins; it can be explanatory; and it can deceive.”³⁴

Oral history is an active process in which interviewers seek out, record, and preserve such memories. Knowing that with age most people find it difficult to recall names and dates, oral historians conduct preparatory research to assist interviewees, give some context and structure to the dialogue through their questions, and mutually address any seeming misstatements and contradictions in the testimony.³⁵

What should interviewers take into consideration about memory?

People remember what *they* think is important, not necessarily what the interviewer thinks is most consequential. An oral historian studying Texas teachers who made the transition from the one-room schoolhouse to modern consolidated schools found that white teachers said almost nothing about racial segregation or the details of the integration process. Blacks, Hispanic Americans, and disabled students remained largely “invisible” in their memories. African American teachers by contrast recalled the days of integration vividly because it affected their own lives so personally.³⁶

Regardless of the project’s worthy objectives, a good oral history will always leave room for interviewees to speak their own minds, and will not try to shoe-horn their responses into a prepared questionnaire or mind-set. Since people remember best what was most exciting and important to them, their most vivid memories are often of the earliest days of their careers, when events were fresh and invigorating, even if their status at the time was relatively insignificant. By the time they had risen in stature and assumed more important positions, daily events had actually become more routine, making details of later life harder to isolate and identify during an interview. One interviewee summed up her three decades on the U.S. Senate staff by observing that when she began work, she was young and the senators were old; when she retired, she was old and the senators were young. As is often the pattern, her descriptions of her youthful experiences were lengthier and richer in detail than her recollections of more recent events.³⁷

After the Second World War, when Congress investigated the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, the chief of naval operations, Adm. Harold Stark, could not recall where he had been the night before the Japanese attacked on December 7, 1941. By contrast, Stark’s flag lieutenant, H. D. Kirk, remembered precisely that they and their wives had gone to see a performance of *The Student Prince*, and then returned to the admiral’s home, where Stark received a telephone call from President Roosevelt. One of the investigating senators asked Kirk how he

could remember the occasion so well, considering that Stark could recall nothing. “Because I was a small fish, and great things were transpiring,” Kirk replied, “and you don’t forget that sort of thing.”³⁸

People regularly reevaluate and re-explain their past decisions and actions. Just as historians rewrite history to incorporate new evidence and fit different theories, individuals use the insights gained from current events to reshape them and make new sense out of past experiences. There is nothing invalidating about this reflectivity, so long as interviewers and researchers understand what is occurring and take it into account.³⁹

Memories start with the initial perception. Interviewees speak from their own points of view, and no two will tell a story exactly alike. Not everyone had a clear picture of what happened, understood what it meant, or felt self-assured enough to accept responsibility. The contradictory tales told in the classic film *Rashomon* (1951) represented the tellers’ differing impressions, self-images and self-delusions, but not poor memories. In combat, generals in the rear may see the broad sweep of the battle, and battlefield troops will have a more microscopic view of the action. As LTJG John F. Kennedy wrote from the Solomon Islands during World War II: “Frankly I don’t know a god-damned thing, as my copy of the *Washington Times-Herald* arrives two months late, due to logistical difficulties, and it is pretty hard to get the total picture of a global war unless you are sitting in New York or Washington, or even Casablanca. I understand we are winning it, which is cheering, albeit hard to see, but I guess the view improves with distance. I know mine would.”⁴⁰

Those at the center of events can well recount their own accomplishments, but those on the periphery are often better able to make comparisons between the principal actors. Perceptions that were originally flawed will produce distorted memories. Distant and second-hand information is more susceptible to distortion. By contrast, direct, dramatic, and emotional situations tend to produce more fixed and lasting memories. For these reasons, oral history projects attempt to collect a wide range of interviews, to piece the puzzle together from various points of view.⁴¹

Not every perceived event is retained in memory. When the radio and television newscaster David Brinkley wrote *Washington Goes to War* (1988), about the years when he first came to the capital as a young broadcaster during the Second World War, he was surprised to find so much in the old newspaper files that had faded from his memory. “I’ve always thought I had a good memory. Now I know I don’t,” Brinkley commented. “Things I knew very well and in fact stood and watched and interviewed people about, I’d totally forgotten. That was the startling thing—how much I’d forgotten.” Once meaningful information can

become irrelevant or insignificant by comparison to later events. Since Brinkley continued to absorb current news as a journalist, the more events grew distant from the latest headlines, the less likely he would think about or retain them.⁴²

The passage of time enables people to make sense out of earlier events in their lives. Actions take on new significance depending on their later consequences. Certain players grow more important in the story, and others diminish over time. People's memories may take on a more mature, mellow, or disillusioned cast according to their mood and condition of the time of the interview. Community members who share a common experience, such as the trauma of a flood or tornado, will talk about it among themselves for years, reinforcing the memories. By the necessity of availability, oral historians interview "survivors," those who lived through it, stuck to it, stayed behind, or otherwise succeeded—all factors that shape how and what they remember.⁴³

Interviewers have to consider how creditable their interviewees are as witnesses. Were they in a position to experience events firsthand or are they simply passing along secondhand information? What biases might have shaped their original perceptions? Have interviewees forgotten much of their past because it was no longer important to them or because the events were so routine that they were simply not memorable? How differently do interviewees feel now about the events they are recalling? What subsequent incidents might have caused them to rethink and reinterpret their past? How closely does their testimony agree with other documentary evidence from the period, and how do they explain the discrepancies? None of these considerations would disqualify an interviewee from giving testimony, but answering these questions as completely as possible helps the interviewer and future researchers to assess the value of the information recorded.⁴⁴

The memories of direct participants are sources far too rich for historical researchers to ignore. Interviewers must be aware of the peculiarities of memory, adept in their methods of dealing with it, conscious of its limitations, and open to its treasures.

Don't peoples' memories tend to become nostalgic?

In his typically tart manner, President Calvin Coolidge once reflected that the folks of his hometown of Plymouth, Vermont, "remember some of the most interesting things that never happened."⁴⁵ Coolidge was referring to how history can be inflated by retrospective associations. It is similarly common to encounter rosy reminiscences about "the good old days," considering that oral historians interview older people about their youth, when even disappointments can be remembered as adventurous incidents. Dissatisfaction with present conditions makes the past look far better; and people's very survival can convince them that the

hard times were not so bad after all. "It's not easy remembering the past," said ninety-one-year-old Evelyn Bailey Wahl when asked to recall her community's evolution from rural to urban over her lifetime, where endless shopping strips and apartments replaced the meadows and farms of her youth. "Sometimes I try not to think about it." Many interviewees will talk about the pain and suffering in their lives, about humiliation, harassment, and discrimination, about disappointments and losses, but others have blocked out the most negative aspects of the past or rewritten their own histories, consciously or subconsciously. It is the oral historian's task to move the interview away from nostalgia to confront the past candidly and critically. If things were different in the past, what were they like? When did they change? How did they change? Why did they change?⁴⁶

In the reaction against the elitist practice of interviewing only famous people, many oral historians changed their focus to community-based "people's history." But after letting the people speak, historians examining community history projects soon realized "that 'the people' weren't speaking unadulterated truth." Linda Shopes, who interviewed for the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project, has argued that: "So many people want to do oral histories in well-intentioned but extremely naive ways: to get interesting stories, to get the anecdotes, to get the colorful stories, to get the cute things. People don't want to confront the fact that history is . . . not a happy little story of days gone by." Quite often people do not want to talk about difficult issues, such as the changing ethnic and racial composition of a community or one generation's rejection of another generation's values. Interviewers must be prepared to ask questions about painful and embarrassing subjects—although they must also respect people's right not to answer such questions, if they so choose.⁴⁷

Nostalgia is hardly limited to social history. Political historians have observed that the longer politicians are out of office, the more highly people rate them, a phenomenon that has been characterized as the "law of rising recollections."⁴⁸ Presidents still in office are compared to their predecessors; out of office they are measured against their successors. The uncertainty of today's headlines sometimes turns past anxiety and turbulence into images of happy days. It becomes more of a challenge for interviewers recording the reminiscences among members of a presidential administration, or associates of some other retired or deceased high-ranking official, to keep them from mentioning only the most positive aspects of their former leader—the side they too often assume is all that the interviewer wants to hear about.

Whole groups may blank out unpleasant memories. When the Southern Oral History Project interviewed the men and women who worked in southern cotton mills during the 1930s, they encountered mostly silence about the General

Strike of 1934, "a kind of social amnesia, born of defeat and of the failure of trade unionism to take root in a living tradition." One mill worker explained: "You see, after we come back and got out of the union and got back to work, why that was a thing of the past. . . . You forget about things in the past, 'cause you don't think about them, you don't talk about them, and that leaves your mind." The lack of oral testimony sent the researchers back into the documentary evidence of these events, even if current memories suppressed them.⁴⁹

Oral historians documenting traumatic events of the past have found that many survivors will refrain from talking about those events, even to their own children. Researchers point out that the first stage of grief is shock, and the second stage is denial. People can stay in denial for a very long time. But as they grow older, and as others who shared the experience die, the survivors will grant interviews as a way of reconciling a haunting record, and also of ensuring that future generations do not forget. J. Robert Slaughter was part of the first regiment of American troops sent ashore at Omaha Beach on D-Day, which suffered appalling casualties. He and other survivors had great difficulty in readjusting to civilian life. In the 1970s, a British television crew tried to interview him for a documentary, but he could remember nothing, having blocked out the painful memories. Not until the 1990s was he able to confront them. "For a long time nobody wanted to think or talk about all that and what it cost," he commented. "For a long time nobody cared. I began to have nightmares that we'd have to do it again someday." Researchers of the Holocaust hear a similar refrain from victims: "I kept quiet for many years, but soon I will be gone and now I must tell my children."⁵⁰

What is "public memory"?

By contrast to individual memories of personal experiences, public memory represents a society's collective conceptions about the past. Public memory involves symbols and stories that help a community define and explain present conditions according to how it remembers (or wants to remember) the past. These can take the form of parades, reunions, reenactments and celebrations, or in monuments and landmarks that often serve to represent reconciliation and healing after a war or tragic event. Such commemorations often have a political connotation, the historian John Bodnar has observed, designed to "stress the desirability of maintaining the social order and existing institutions."⁵¹

Since individuals experience events differently and maintain different social objectives, they will hotly contest issues of public memory. Arguments predictably erupt over the design and location of monuments and the inscriptions placed upon them. The dispute over an appropriate Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for instance, invoked earlier controversies as groups who had differed over fighting

the war now disagreed over how to portray it. Politics lies behind every public monument and also explains the absence of monuments and memorials to people and events that communities would prefer to forget. Public memory can also influence personal memory, since people within a community absorb the public debates and internalize particular positions. Interviewers need to be conscious of a community's collective beliefs and try to move beyond public memory to the personal experiences of those they interview.⁵²

Recognizing that what people remember can be shaped by their social environment, scholars have analyzed the ways in which communities construct and use their collective memory, and what they pass along to succeeding generations. The folklorist Alessandro Portelli conducted interviews in the Italian town of Terni, where he gathered several versions of the death of Luigi Trastulli. A twenty-one-year-old steel worker, Trastulli had died in a clash with police. Contemporary newspaper accounts placed the date of his death in 1949, when steelworkers walked out of their factory to attend a Communist-sponsored rally against the Italian government's joining the North American Treaty Organization. But as time passed, the townspeople collectively altered the story to give it epic form. One interviewee after another shifted the date and context of Trastulli's death from the anti-NATO rally to the street fighting that followed a massive layoff of steelworkers four years later. Wondering why so many people got it "wrong," Portelli concluded that the community had been unable to accept Trastulli's death as an accidental shooting in a minor scuffle over a fleeting political issue. Instead, people had relocated the event to a far bigger dispute that involved their basic livelihood. As transfigured, Trastulli's death helped to heal the community's wounds and to instruct the next generation: "He died for you."⁵³

What's the difference between oral history and folklore?

Oral historians and folklorists both use interviews to collect information, but not necessarily the same type of information. The two practices have been described as opposite ends of a continuum: oral historians concentrate on recording the personal experiences of the interviewee, and folklorists collect the traditional stories, songs and other expressions of the community, fact or fiction. An oral historian would most likely interview a husband and wife separately, seeking to identify the unique perspective of each spouse. A folklorist, being as interested in the way a story is told as in its substance, would interview the couple together to observe the interplay as one begins a story and the other finishes it. The folklorist Barbara Allen has observed that historians "tend to see oral historical sources as mines of raw data from which historical evidence can

be extracted," while folklorists are more concerned with "recognizing identifiable patterns" in the way people shape their narrative.⁵⁴

Sharing an interest in interviewing, oral historians, folklorists, ethnographers, cultural anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists, each have different objectives that influence their methodology. "Field-oriented" disciplines rely on participant observation and may not even take notes in the presence of those they are studying, waiting to write up their notes later from memory. Unlike historians, who seek concrete evidence of what actually happened and to document it as fully as possible, folklorists, ethnographers, and anthropologists are often less interested in verification of facts and see folk tales and folklore as no less legitimate than other stories. Linguists will often be more concerned with the manner of telling a story than in its substance. Despite the distinctive way that these assorted disciplines analyze and use interviews, the intersection of their methodological techniques has permitted collaborative, cross-disciplinary oral history projects on a range of community, racial, ethnic and immigration issues.⁵⁵

Can storytelling be considered oral history?

Diverse cultures depend on storytelling to pass along knowledge and understanding. The storyteller might be a parent teaching a child, a tribal elder recalling communal traditions, a preacher illustrating a point in a sermon, an Old Salt spinning a yarn, or anyone else able to recount past experiences in a manner entertaining enough to hold a crowd. Folklorists find that tales passed down, family lore, and community legends have value as much for their form (how they are told) as for their content. Such stories are often communal in nature, transcending the individual experiences they describe. Recurring stories within a community that emerge in oral history collections also reveal what people consider to be the key aspects of their historical experience.⁵⁶

In those cases where storytelling takes place without an interviewer who can pursue issues raised in the stories by questioning the narrator, it does not fit the standard definition of oral history, but its study illuminates some significant issues facing oral historians. Most storytellers aim not so much to preserve a permanent record as to inform and influence their immediate audience. Although the storyteller usually controls the performance, the particular setting and audience can affect the story's presentation. Telling a story in a new setting, to a new audience creates new meanings. Storytelling reminds us that all oral presentations involve a degree of performance, and that the audience (even an audience of one, as in the interviewer) can affect that performance. Stories told in an interview often involve a re-telling of something the interviewee heard from someone else or has previously told to others. As the "audience," the interviewer can

affect in subtle or even striking ways the content of the story. The process continues even after the interview is completed. The oral historian William Schneider has pointed out that "once the narrator stops talking and the recorder leaves with the tape, the teller no longer knows who will hear it and how they will understand what he or she said." Some sensitivity to the nature of storytelling is therefore essential to the management of oral history collections. To be fair to participants, Schneider advises, "we have to be mindful of a wide range of considerations, not the least of which is the oral tradition from which the narrator may have built the telling and from which the audience derives its background for understanding what has been shared."⁵⁷

Is it better to interview immediately after an event or wait until years later?

There are advantages and disadvantages to each course of action. The military pioneered debriefing interviews with soldiers immediately after a battle or after returning from a combat tour of duty. Memories of details will be sharper the closer to the actual events that the interview occurs. But interviews conducted long after the events benefit from the interviewee's reflections that better enable them to weigh the events and sort the significant from the trivial. Debriefings tend to be shorter and more focused interviews. Later oral histories, especially life review interviews, tend to be more extensive.

The day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Alan Lomax contacted other folklorists around the country to collect "man on the street" reactions. Recordings of interviews that ranged from janitors to physicians, cab drivers, housewives, students and soldiers were then sent to the Library of Congress and used to create a radio documentary program for national broadcast and distribution to schools. Sixty years later, within a week of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, oral historians began interviewing witnesses and survivors. The Columbia Oral History Research Office, together with the New-York Historical Society and other New York museums, quickly launched a project to interview those who had escaped the World Trade Towers, families of victims, police and fire fighters, rescue and relief workers, and members of nearby Muslim communities. Underwritten by the National Science Foundation, the project not only conducted initial debriefings but planned additional interviews in later years to examine the durability of memories of traumatic events. At the Library of Congress, the American Folklife Center initiated a "September 11, 2001 Documentary Project" to record the thoughts and feelings of citizens across the country. Historians for the National Park Service and the Red Cross taped interviews with eyewitnesses to the tragedies, while historians for the military services

interviewed those who experienced the plane crash at the Pentagon. The Senate Historical Office conducted interviews concerning the evacuation of the Capitol Building on September 11th and of the anthrax contamination that closed the Hart Senate Office Building for three months. "Down the road, researchers also will use newspaper accounts, videos and film, government documents and mementos culled from the destruction to study that day. There will be intelligence reports, declassified years from now, to add to the record," the *Wall Street Journal* noted. "But it is the oral histories that are most likely to help researchers understand what it felt like to be under attack on that late summer morning."⁵⁸

What distinguishes a "life history" from other interviews?

Gerontologists refer to the "life review" process of the elderly, and oral historians speak of conducting "life histories," by which they mean full-scale autobiographical accounts that allow interviewees to relate their entire life, from childhood to the present. Social scientists may concentrate on a series of shorter interviews with members of a group in a particular community or environment, such as workers on a shop floor. Oral historians call these "episodic" interviews. Shorter interviews conducted with members of a group soon after they shared a mutual experience are referred to as "debriefings." Conducting life histories usually means selecting fewer interviewees and devoting more time, and multiple interview sessions, to each one. Life histories give the interviewee enough time to relate what both the interviewer seeks and the interviewee wants to tell. The oral historian conducting even a subject-oriented project should seriously consider expanding the scope of its questions to record as much as possible about each interviewee's life. Broader questioning establishes links that neither interviewer nor interviewee may have considered in a more narrowly focused interview session.⁵⁹

When the Oregon Historical Society launched an oral history of the federal court system in its state, it focused on the people who conducted the court rather than the institution of the court itself. Following a full biographical approach proved especially useful when dealing with the appointment of judges. An institutional approach might also have included questions about a judge's appointment, but interviewers found that the meaning and significance of the responses were enhanced when told within the context of the judge's full life history.⁶⁰

The first presidential library oral history projects concentrated almost exclusively on the interviewees' relationships with the president or roles in the administration. This produced a large number of relatively short interviews. In later years, some of the libraries returned to re-interview the key players in more depth. In this second round of interviewing, the oral historian at the Lyndon B. Johnson

Library conducted thirty-six hours of interviews with Lawrence O'Brien (who served as congressional liaison and postmaster general), and sixty-four interview sessions with Joseph Califano (who was special assistant to the president for domestic affairs). Although this level of in-depth interviewing lies beyond the budget of most oral historians, other projects should aim, at least on a selective basis, to do fuller life histories. Even individual researchers need to look beyond their immediate interests when interviewing. The American Historical Association has advised that, "to the extent practicable, interviewers should extend the inquiry beyond their immediate needs to make each interview as complete as possible for the benefit of others."⁶¹

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ORAL HISTORY

What is the role of oral history in "public history"?

Public history was once defined exclusively in terms of historians' activities in public agencies and as private consultants outside of the university. But the definition has expanded beyond place of employment to include the audiences that historians try to reach. Public historians aim for an out-of-school public audience, which might be officials in the government agency, corporations, union, philanthropic organization, or professional association that employs the historian or the library-using, documentary-viewing, museum-going general public. Other professional historians, for whom the bulk of historical literature is intended, account for only a small portion of the public historian's audience.⁶²

Public history is an organized effort to bring accurate, meaningful history to a public audience, and oral history is a natural tool for reaching that goal. The oral history and public history movements share a natural affinity, both having attracted practitioners and audiences different from those for more traditional history writing. Both oral and public history have experimented with videotape, slide-tape, and even interactive videos, in museum exhibits, dramatic performances, and other applications outside of the classroom and in publications.⁶³

How pervasive is oral history within government?

Governments at all levels have come to appreciate the utilitarian aspects of oral history. Government agencies hire historians on staff or on contract to use oral history as a tool for collecting and presenting information relating to that agency's operations. When the Washington-based Society for History in the Federal Government conducted a survey, it found oral history projects in all branches of the military, the intelligence agencies, many cabinet departments,

Congress, the federal courts, the Smithsonian museums, and independent agencies from NASA to the National Institutes of Health. The National Park Service has the most ongoing oral history projects, with historians and rangers across the country collecting interviews for use in documenting the sites and producing visitor orientation materials.⁶⁴

Perhaps the most common programs interview the staff of the sponsoring agency, who discuss their careers and evaluate the political appointees, policy making, and institutional changes they have witnessed. Retired staff members, whose obscurity and anonymity masked the often significant roles they played within their agencies, offer recollections that can explain and unravel the voluminous, impersonal, and unrevealing written records of the modern bureaucracy. Public historians possess several advantages in conducting these staff interviews. As employees of the same agency, they have a better chance of obtaining access to agency files, whether open or classified. They share a familiarity with arcane agency procedure that helps not only in preparing questions but in establishing rapport and obtaining candid responses.

Most often, oral history is a component part of a government historical office rather than its primary mission. Periodically, however, Congress has appropriated funds specifically for an oral history. In 1998, when Congress directed the National Park Service to establish a historic site in Tuskegee, Alabama, that would memorialize the World War II African-American pilots known as the Tuskegee Airmen, it earmarked funds for an oral history with the survivors. Their experiences dated to the era when both training and combat assignments had been racially segregated. Two years later, Congress authorized the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress to establish a nationwide Veterans History Project to encourage citizens to conduct and donate to the Library audio and video oral histories with war veterans from World War I to the Persian Gulf war.⁶⁵

Local governments have also delved into oral history, to promote a community anniversary or some other significant event, or to document the workings of the government. Projects have ranged from the New York Transit Authority's collection of interviews with transit workers for a history of the city's subways, to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources sponsorship of a video history of the state's park, forest, and wildlife management. On a worldwide basis, local councils from Sydney to Southampton have funded oral history to record events of significance to their communities.

How have oral historians marketed their services?

The public presentation of oral history has generated a number of independent enterprises. Oral historians have set up business to conduct family interviews,

and they work as freelance interviewers for corporations, charitable trusts, scientific organizations, and various other government and private agencies. Charles Morrissey, who has made a career as a freelance oral historian in fields ranging from politics to biomedical research, commented, "To my total amazement, once my availability evidenced itself to others, the number of clients seeking help from me as an oral historian became formidable."⁶⁶

Independent interviewers work on both specific projects and long-term contractual arrangements. Joel Gardner, as head of Gardner Associates, specializes in conducting oral histories for corporations and other organizations, and his clients include the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Philadelphia Fire Museum, the Union League of Philadelphia, and the Pew Charitable Trust. One of Gardner's projects resulted in a book, *Seventy-Five Years of Good Taste: A History of the Tasty Baking Company* (1990), based on interviews with thirty-five employees. Noting that corporate executives were increasingly attuned to the value of preserving their historical records, Garner helps create corporate archives and libraries. When doing oral histories, he seeks unlimited access to records, documents, and employees. Gardner urges his corporate sponsors to make the oral histories available to the public, but he notes that some of his clients turn to him because they feel uncomfortable with university-based oral history programs and prefer to keep the interviews within their own archives. In suburban Maryland, near Washington, D.C., Philip Cantelon founded History Associates, which has done oral histories for the federal government, for MCI, and for the American Furniture Hall of Fame. The Amfac Land Company contracted with the Center for Oral History at the University of Hawaii to interview longtime laborers and managers at its former sugar mills and plantations in the islands, a century-old way of life that is ending. Such projects have been remarkably successful, but as one independent interviewer noted, "When your funding depends on grants, as mine does, I spend more time writing reports and applying for grants than I do interviewing."⁶⁷

When the president of Atlantic Richfield Company (ARCO) concluded that the corporation was losing the knowledge of its "epochal events" because employees and manager with firsthand knowledge of those events were dying, he commissioned Enid Douglass to conduct oral histories that would produce both an oral history archival collection and a written history of the company. The book was intended to make the company "more human and real" to the public, as well as to help ARCO employees better understand and thereby identify with the company so that they would become "more loyal and dedicated employees." Management used the oral histories to develop case studies on decision-making process and for workshops to train potential corporate executives.⁶⁸

In contrast to these corporate activities, oral history has also been used for public-interest projects. In the Southwest, anthropologists, historians, legal scholars, lawyers, folklorists, and oral historians worked together to assist citizens in fighting for land and water rights. The New Mexico-based Center for Land Grant Studies was particularly concerned with protecting the rights of Native Americans and Mexican Americans who lacked the traditional types of ownership documentation to their lands. Representatives of the center used oral history as part of their courtroom testimony, a use that required proper techniques for gathering oral evidence and a greater need to assess the reliability of the oral testimony.⁶⁹

What are the potential drawbacks of doing corporate oral history?

Oral historians hired for corporate projects report that many corporate executives and policymakers do not understand how historians work or how they use oral histories and that they need to be educated about the methods of historical research. Managers and other corporate executives often do not value or use their corporate archives and fear the consequences of allowing outsiders to see their records. They will not open records even for the historians they hire. They assume that oral historians, like journalists, can interview anyone, anytime, without extensive research. Oral historians have to explain their needs to see records to prepare adequately for their interviews. Sometimes, however, these records will not be forthcoming. In the 1960s, for instance, interviewers for the John F. Kennedy Library were initially denied access to Kennedy's records.

Charles Morrissey has observed that corporate managers tend to select prospective interviewees depending on their rank in the corporate hierarchy, whereas oral historians want to interview those who actually shaped the issues being studied, "even if they are obscure figures in the structured bureaucracies and do not command power or deference within their institutions." In fact, these seemingly anonymous members of the institution may have drafted the letters and speeches of higher executives and may have proposed the policies that the hierarchy adopted. They often have the least biased perspective on the institution. Lower-level staff members may actually have a clearer view of how policies evolved, be better able to evaluate people and programs, and have not only more detailed memories but a greater "willingness to impart what they remember."

Interviewers should try to align with one of the senior members of an organization, such as the chairman of the board, the chief executive officer or the director of a public agency, who can open doors for the project and get access to records. The interviewer should brief top policymakers about the project as it

evolves, giving them an idea of what methods are being employed and what information is being collected. Public historians are not public relations specialists and should not be required to tailor their work to reaffirm the picture of itself an institution may promote to the public. To be useful to clients, a historical study has to be honestly critical. The public historian's need to maintain professional standards works both ways: not only must historians be honestly critical, but they must also be willing to keep information confidential according to the policies of the organization that hired them.⁷⁰

What will future historians want from our oral histories?

Researchers will want to hear the first-person observations of events great and small, and to learn what sense those people made out of the events in their own lives. Motivations and objectives are especially important. Other sources can usually provide the who, what, when, and where of history; interviews can offer better insights into the how and why. The historian's job is to pull together a multitude of evidence from documents, objects, interviews, and other resources, weaving them together to create a narrative that makes sense of all of the often conflicting evidence.

Not all human activity is coherent and purposeful, the historian Elie Kedourie pointed out; it is more often a complex of choices producing unpredictable effects. Kedourie defined history as an account of people "in the peculiarity, idiosyncrasy, and specificity of their personalities, outlooks, capacities, and positions, confronting or dealing with other [people] differently placed in respect to these things, and confronting or dealing with them in situations different from one another at least in respect of time and place, initiating, originating, taking measures, parrying, responding, reacting; the vocabulary we use to describe all this amply indicating that here are present and involved purpose and choice, mind and will." Or, as Ecclesiastes 9:11 instructs, "The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. . . but time and chance happeneth to them all." Oral history records both the purposeful and the accidental. Interviewers who allow people a chance to assess why they did what they did will most likely capture the peculiarities and idiosyncracies of the history of our time.⁷¹

Historians writing a dissertation or a book, planning an exhibit or scripting a documentary, will have their own set of questions they want to ask but may not have the opportunity to ask those questions personally. I first used oral history while writing a biography of a man who had died ten years earlier. Fortunately, he had given a lengthy oral history to Columbia University just months before he died. It was a thoroughly detailed, in-depth life history, amounting to seven hundred pages of transcripts. As I could no longer question the man, Columbia's

interviewer served as my surrogate. Today's oral historians are doing the preliminary work of tomorrow's biographers and researchers, hoping they will not have to agonize too often over the questions we failed to ask.⁷²

Oral history is about asking questions. While researching the history of Methodist camp meetings in Southern Mississippi, Charles Sullivan sought to visit every campground still operating. One day he mentioned to a student each of the camps that he had identified. "Yes, and Mt. Pleasant, too," the student responded, explaining that it was a black Methodist campground established after emancipation from slavery. Astonished, Sullivan wondered why no one had mentioned this camp before. "Probably because you never asked," came the reply. That is the reason for doing oral history: to ask the questions that have not been asked, and to collect the reminiscences that otherwise would be lost.⁷³